ATS Biennial Meeting
June 21, 2012
Theological Education panel discussion
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I am flattered to have been asked to speak for 40 million Mainline Protestants, although, given what has been happening, that number may be smaller today than it was yesterday. More than four decades of parish ministry and involvement in denominational governance, have taught me that one of the reasons we are Mainline protestants, is that we cannot abide anyone presuming to speak for any of us. We have become a fractious family, more so in recent years than ever, it seems. We Presbyterians are gearing up for our biennial slug-fest called a General Assembly and before it is all over we will have been reminded that members of our relatively small ecclesial family have deep disagreements with one another that threaten to divide us once again, which for 450 years is our favorite way of resolving conflict.

The last thing you need is another homily on what ails the

Mainline Church and what to do about it.

But indulge me for a few very broad and quick observations…

- We are smaller than we used to be.
    - There are fewer of us than there were 40 years ago. Fewer this year than last.
    - Our percentage place in the overall picture of American Religion is also smaller.
- We used to define the heart, the center of religion in America. We don’t any longer. It has been almost 5 decades since one of us was on the cover of TIME, and sometimes we have difficulty adjusting to our new, diminished status.
- We are caught in the middle of a demographic, economic upheaval:
    - We have thousands of small churches in places that were once vibrant communities; in cities, rural, county-seat towns, but are no longer;

thousands of churches with aging buildings and aging congregations, increasingly unable to afford a full-time pastor.

- There are nuances:
    - There are wonderfully vital, faithful, creative, missional, growing congregations as well – urban and suburban.
    - And, we have left a deep and good mark on American culture. We started many of the colleges, universities, hospitals, social service agencies. We represented a way of thinking that has transformed American culture.
    - Senator Fullbright (I believe it was) famously said to President Lyndon Johnson—when things were going badly in Vietnam – “just declare victory and leave.” Sometimes I want my church, the Mainline Church, not to leave, God forbid, but to rest a little more easily at a job well done, mission and faithfully accomplished.

I am concerned, most, about the way Mainline Churches reflect the ideological divide in American culture:

-every mainline denomination has its own version of a cultural war, complete with Tea Party-like activists who are vociferously opposed to everything the denomination does or says.

Putnam and Campbell in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, have observed that young adults are sick of it, appalled by church fights and leaving and not returning.

I need also to say that the 12 schools related to the General Assembly of the PCUSA are one of the few “stable zones” in our church.

Some of the best, most faithful Presbyterian Christians are the Presidents, Deans, faculty of these seminaries.

When I was privileged to attend their meetings, in a

denomination that specializes in intramural warfare, I always came away inspired by the collegiality, courtesy, Christian love.

In terms of Theological Education, my modest credentials are that I am associated with a journal, which for more than a century has kept a finger on the pulse of Christian theology, the life of the churches, and the interface of Christian faith and culture. Many, if not most of our contributing writers across the years have been and are involved in Theological Education teaching. In addition, I have taught a bit, sat on a Board of Trustees and served as President of the Board of a Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

My experience chairing the Board of Trustees of McCormick Theological Seminary taught me, not only the challenges of budget realities and physical plant maintenance, faculty comings and goings, but also, happily, the amazing

transformation of Mainline Protestant theological education into a truly diverse, multicultural project.

The happiest responsibility of a board chair is to hand diplomas to graduates at Commencement. One of the best and most memorable experiences of my life was to watch them coming across the Chancel of Rockefeller Chapel, look each one in the eye, shake hands and congratulate a startling diverse parade, so utterly unlike my own graduation as to be unbelievable: women and men in almost equal numbers, older and younger - a few in their mid-twenties but not many: African American, Hispanic, Asian American and Caucasian. I found myself deeply moved, with tears in my eyes as I saw a new thing, a new creation if you will, a new thing God is creating in the world, now, in our time.

Dan Aleshire has eloquently reminded us of what we are becoming and have already become, the Mainline Seminaries and this organization itself. I dare to believe that it is part of the promise of the Kingdom and part of the

challenge we all face - a truly multi-racial, multi cultural society and a church that remains too mono-racial, mono-cultural.

My own denomination has always held out for a "learned ministry" and the assumption that preparation for ministry happens in a graduate school, academic, residential setting.

Two developments are challenging that assumption:

One: the cost of that model is increasingly prohibitive. One of the unfortunate results is that many complete their undergraduate and graduate education and begin ministry with very significant debt. The even more unhappy reality is that many of the congregations where they might serve cannot afford to pay them.

Two: Many of the prospective seminary students, particularly at McCormick, are already working, married with children, at full-time jobs. Some of them are already in

ministry of some form or another. Picking up and moving into an academic enclave for three or four years is simply not going to happen.

And so the Presbyterian Church and others have come up with an accessible, affordable model: Commissioned Lay Pastors. It is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, CLPs are serving faithfully and keeping small churches alive, many of them racial/ethnic and rural parishes. On the other hand, CLPs, by their very nature do not have the academic experience, in languages, for instance, history, social ethical theory which, until now, we have insisted are prerequisite and necessary for the practice of ministry. Seminaries are trying to fill the gap, but I think have the responsibility to do more, to come up with ways CLP's receive something closer to the education and nurture we have always insisted that ministry requires.

At the end of my first year at the Divinity School of the

University of Chicago, I found myself working two jobs, evenings and weekend, with a wife and new baby, and an empty bank account A notice on the bulletin board announced an opportunity..(“Student Pastor) small Union Church, 25 miles south of town, $50 a week, free use of the parsonage on half an acre" – That’s what did it. If the earth didn't move the spirit certainly spoke..$50 a week and a real house. For some reason, with absolutely no experience, and not at all sure I wanted to be a minister, I applied, and, God bless them, they offered me the job and I took it. So we moved and I started acting like a minister, preaching, creating worship bulletins, teaching the adult class and confirmation class, visiting in the hospital and, in my very first week, sitting in ICU beside Johnny Johnson's bed as he died… an experience so absolutely different and remote from anything in my life that I couldn’t believe what I was doing and then starting with the family and planning a funeral, my first.

I learned to be a minister by total immersion in ministry. I

learned as I was sitting in class in Swift Hall listening to Joseph Sittler, Marcus Barth, James Nichols, Seward Hiltner lecture and then getting in my car and driving back to Dyer, Indiana, to work on Sunday's sermon, or to make a hospital call. Barbara Wheeler, good friend and one of the wisest people I know, said once, .."Buchanan, you learned to be a minister in your car, driving between The University of Chicago and your church and community in Dyer, Indiana."

I have seen a variation on the theme work extremely well… The Lilly Endowment Residents in Pastoral Ministry program. Seminary graduates spend two years, doing ministry, learning by doing, interacting with colleagues, and most importantly, with lay leaders'. They have gone on, after completing the two-year residency, to ordination and faithful, creative and effective ministries.

The late Don Browning who taught at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago thought a lot about the old conundrum of "practical theology" vs. "real theology". He

came up with some fascinating ideas. ""All theology is practical", he said. "Practical theology is not a subspecialty but theology as such." Browning argued that "practical thinking is the center of human thinking and theological and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking".. " We never move from theory to practice, even when it seems that we do. Theory is always embedded in practice"

So my dream, my vision: affordable theological education, with two equal foci: classroom and church schools that have sufficient resources to attract the very best scholars and the very best students because there would be no tuition, no cost, in fact… theological education available to any who want it and feel called to it and, this is key, are qualified to be admitted. Is it realistic? Some are actually toying with the idea. In my own ecclesial family it would mean upsetting an apple cart, a very sturdy apple cart, that has been in place for a very long time and has thousands of adherents who are loyal to their alma mater and committed to the status quo. It would mean fewer, but larger, seminaries, bringing together

the considerable resources each has. It is heresy, I know, and will win me no friends, but I continue to believe that our future, if we are to have one, looks something like that.

And in conjunction with those fewer, larger, financially strong institutions a matrix of "Teaching Parishes: where students would be in residence for part, and maybe, all the time they are in the process. Supervised by working pastors, who, themselves, are part of the faculty of the schools…students learning in the car or train or bus as they travel between classroom and church.

It is, of course, a very long shot… but I find it exciting to think about and I commend it to you.

In a recent piece he wrote for the Christian Century, Tom Long remembers attending a conference on the future. It was the 70's and Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* was the book everyone was talking about.

A systematic theologian gave the closing address and said “I am a theologian. I have no idea what the future holds. I know only that it will be held in the hands of God.”

2 years later he reread all the papers the conference produced and told Tom, “You know, I was the only one who was right.”